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Book Reviews

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## Review of *Talking White Trash: Mediated Representations and Lived Experiences of White-Working Class People* by Tasha R. Dunn (Routledge)

Holly Willson Holladay

**ABSTRACT** In *Talking White Trash*, Tasha R. Dunn provides a multi-methodological investigation into the representations of white working-class people on screen and the everyday lives of members of the white working-class. Her work provides a nuanced way to understand the reinforcement of stereotypical depictions of this population, as well as how the white working class "talks back" to these representations. The book draws from the current political and cultural moment to assert how white working-class identity is constructed, and advocates for a more complex reading of this population than is often provided in mediated texts.

*Talking White Trash: Mediated Representations and Lived Experiences of White-Working Class People*. By Tasha R. Dunn, New York, USA: Routledge, 2018, 158 pp. (hardcover) 9781138486348. US List: \$150.00. (paperback) ISBN 9781138486355. US List: \$44.95.

During the months following the 2016 election of Donald Trump, culture writers penned countless essays exploring the connection between Trump's ascendancy and the white working class. As the common narrative would have it, this voting bloc, frustrated by job loss and general economic anxiety, pledged allegiance en masse to Trump, whose campaign rhetoric seemed tailor-made to address their concerns. This analysis, however, often remained insufficient, offering conjecture based on voting statistics loosely supplemented with newsworthy quips from Trump voters. In *Talking White Trash: Mediated Representations and Lived Experiences of White Working-Class People*, Tasha R. Dunn engages with this population to investigate what may be learned about the white working class through the intersections of media and everyday life. A multi-methodological approach, drawing from media texts featuring working-class white characters, in-depth interviews with the white working class, and her own experiences as a working-class white woman, is a significant strength of her work. Rather than relying on one mode of analysis, Dunn masterfully weaves together text, narrative, and autoethnographic accounts; in doing so, she endeavors to take seriously and to provide a nuanced portrait of a population which "has often been the butt of cultural jokes" (11).

Dunn begins *Talking White Trash* by offering the aforementioned cultural and political context, as well as situating her own experiences within the framework of her research. She then traces the history of both "white trash" as a raced and classed category, and white working-class representation in mediated spaces. Connecting the current political and economic climate with mediated histories serves as an impetus for her work; as she points out, "history has shown that popular and problematic images of the white working class thrive during times of economic and social decline," reinforcing the notion that the

white working class is “deserving of their lot in life and undeserving of anything that could improve it” (38).

Indeed, in the years following the 2008 economic downturn, depictions of the white working class proliferated through the “redneck reality” subgenre, which, like other reality programming, relies on a “rhetoric of realism...to authenticate the stereotypes of disenfranchised populations that are portrayed” (47). Dunn then turns to one of the preeminent “redneck reality” programs of the recession era, TLC’s *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, to offer an account of the ways in which this authentication functions. Her close textual analysis of the series, which features a white working-class family, reveals how neoliberal rhetorics of surveillance and personal responsibility intersect with the performative spectacle of reality television to underscore the family’s presentation of “inappropriate whiteness.” As Dunn argues, placing the onus of responsibility solely on this family obfuscates the structural barriers that prevent upward economic mobility for white working-class families.

Articulating mediated stereotypes of the white working class is but one way of understanding their place in the contemporary cultural milieu, and has been addressed many times before. Where *Talking White Trash* stands out among this body of research begins in the book’s third chapter, in which Dunn combines autoethnographic experiences and interview data from her participants to paint a rich portrait of the lived experiences of the white working class. Dunn’s interactive focus groups were extensive; she met multiple times with each self-identified working-class family that she recruited through word-of-mouth and online postings for interviews that lasted up to two hours. Her interviews centered on both what working class whiteness means in today’s America, and the evaluation of working-class white representation on screen. Through the words of her participants, Dunn is able to address many of those structural inequalities missing from mediated depictions of the working class; she takes on the mobile home industry, for-profit higher education, and the healthcare industry to ultimately conclude that many in the working class “are stuck in a liminal space, craving and seeking mobility but finding immobility due to a lack of jobs as well as affordable housing, childcare, education and healthcare” (91). Perhaps the most enlightening element of Dunn’s work comes from her participants’ readings of working-class television and film. While she admits to bristling at these representations herself, she is surprised to learn how the working-class families with whom she spoke had much more complicated and complex feelings; they expressed dismay at the reductionist and stereotypical depictions of the white working class, but also routinely drew comparisons between themselves and their families and what they saw in those portrayals. Dunn points out that her participants’ interpretations were most commonly illustrative of the push-pull of a negotiated reading position, “alluding to the multilayered, diverse, and contradictory ways media messages are decoded” (113).

*Talking White Trash* is written with a narrative and accessible voice. This approach dovetails neatly with her rejection of viewing media audiences, especially those in the working class who are stereotyped as unintelligent or uneducated, as incapable of consuming media critically. Although her participants may not have the theoretical language accessible to academics, her interpretation of their insights makes a compelling case for the ways that they consume media through a critical lens. Specifically, she grounds their observations in both cultural conversations about the white working class and scholarship about media reception; connecting participants’ lived experiences and understandings of media to broader discourses about race and class reinforces her aim to complicate the narrow conception of the white working class in the popular imaginary. Indeed, evoking Stuart Hall’s *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, Dunn demonstrates that audience interpretations provide a necessary complement to scholarly

readings of mediated texts, especially given that her interview participants' reading of working-class representation diverged from her own. She urges her readers to "value criticism outside academic spaces" (118), echoing the assertions of reception studies researchers.

Dunn's book is characterized by the self-reflexivity central to autoethnographic methods. Her transparency about the research process and the conclusions she has reached necessarily inform not only what we take from her work, but also how we should interpret all claims made from participant data. Moments of Dunn's work are vulnerable, particularly as she grapples with the liminal, "insider/outsider" space she occupies as an upwardly mobile academic returning to working-class communities as a researcher. Yet, the both/and role works from the other direction as well, and Dunn writes candidly throughout the book about the performances of middle-classness necessary to be taken seriously as an academic. Dunn's honest reflections about these tensions extend beyond *Talking White Trash*, serving as a necessary reminder of how the academy is a space marked by race, class, and other aspects of identity. It is only through work like Dunn's that we may begin to pull back the curtain to expose these divisions in higher education, in media, in politics, and in culture and, as Dunn notes, serve as "a springboard from which to jump and discover new knowledge" (141).

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